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The Perennial Denial and Tormented Self: Delineation of Transwomen's Struggle for Space and Social Validity in Megha Majumdar's 'A Burning'

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Abstract

Indian English Literature has seen various representations in the past few years and the remarkable progress it has made in reflecting the society and its way of living is to be acknowledged. Literature has always been a cornerstone in not only reflecting, sharing the point of views of different stakeholders of the society. The elites as well as the underprivileged find a space in the literature. Literature has been recognizing, establishing and acknowledging their identity, their thoughts, aspirations, thus making the society more inclusive in nature. Indian literature with its multiple languages, cultures and rich thinkers and visionaries brings a nuanced understanding of the dispossessed, disadvantaged groups, their needs, contributions to the society. The third gender is also represented by Indian literature. Third gender has been previously represented in classical Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. But concerning the contemporary times, there has been a dearth of talks and discussion on third gender and their roles in the society. Third gender, a community encounters unforeseen pains, pressures, humiliations and mistreatment. They are socially excluded and struggle for a space to speak up as a stakeholder of the society. They are ignored, misunderstood and criminalized and labelled as useless to the society. Their marginalization knows no limits as most of the times they are not considered as human beings. They struggle for a space to stand and raise their voice as they do not conform to the binary genders. The society fails to grant them positions of respect and give them acceptance. In the heteronormative world they are ignored and marginalized which makes their life meaningless. There has been many autobiographies, memoirs and non-fiction writings but Megha Majumdar's novel 'A Burning' is perhaps the first Indian fiction to have a transgender woman as a main character and she gives her a central place in this narrative. Here, transwomen are portrayed more empathetically and their struggle for space, dreams and success makes this literary piece a unique one. Far from the stereotypical description, here Majumdar brings a freshness to this character with his unique ways of fighting and succeeding. The transwoman Lovely, who wants to become a film actress in Bollywood makes a statement that she is not worthless, rather by her talent she can reach anywhere. The main objective of the paper is to demonstrate the transwoman's struggle for basic human rights, social standing and the impact of social marginalization on their mental condition and personhood.

Keywords: Transgender, India English Literature, Third Gender Narratives, Marginalization

Introduction:

“Transgender is an umbrella term referring to a range of gender identities and expressions different to those assigned at birth. This can include those who conform to the notion of a gender binary and wish to transition from one gender to another, or those who reject this idea (e.g., genderqueer, nonbinary, etc.). Some transgender people can experience discomfort or distress relating to the discrepancy between their gender identity and that which they were assigned at birth this is referred to as gender dysphoria.” (Marshall et al., 2016)

“Because “transgender” is a word that has come into widespread use only in the past couple of decades, its meanings are still under construction. I use it in this book to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth; people who cross over (trans) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.” (Stryker 5)

“Why the current obsession with all transgender things, when transgender phenomena seem to be a pretty persistent part of human cultures across time and around the world? Although the mass media have paid nonstop attention to transgender issues since at least the 1950s, the past several years certainly have witnessed a steady increase in transgender visibility, and the trend has been toward increasingly positive representation.” (Stryker 24)

“Globalization brings us all into increasingly frequent and extensive contact with people from cultures different from our own—including people who have different experiences of gender and sexuality.” (Stryker 25)

The term ‘transgender’ denotes a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ ‘Transgender’ includes gender identities that have, more traditionally, been described as “Transsexual and a diversity of genders that call into question an assumed relationship between gender identity and presentation and the ‘sexed’ body.” (Hines 1)

“Similarly, Sandra Anderson writes: “many [LGBT individuals] have internalized hostile treatment [...] resulting in guilt, shame, low self-esteem, depression and substance abuse.” (Anderson, 2009)

Eli Clare offers an interesting account of how shame may be the root of many predicaments associated with gender variance, and makes an intriguing comparison between the stigma associated with disability and the stigma associated with gender variance. (Clare, 2013)

A Historical and Literary overview of Transgenders in India

Transgender writings have been existing since times immemorial. But the perspective changes according to the time and space. India is not far behind in this matter. Trans literature has been enriched by a number of writers of this century and their efforts to give the third gender a voice is to be praised and they create beautiful literature with such characters that will remain immortal. While the mainstream literature has been far away to deal with this subject matter, few writers are coming forward to talk on this issue while others dismissed it as insignificant, some new writers find it more refreshing and relevant in these days. Transgender history has been dating back to the ancient texts such as Rigveda, classic epics such as The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. These writings had featured characters beyond the binary gender of men and women. The concept of ‘Napumsaka’ was there. Their strong presence has been felt in Hindu mythologies and Puranas.

“The literature named Kama Shastra the ancient Hindu text in which they have been referred as ‘tritiyapakriti’ or third gender has been an integral part of Vedic and puranic literatures, it categorizes men who desire other men as a ‘third nature.’” (A Brief History of Transgenders in India)

According to Devdutt Pattanaik “Contrary to the western world, queerness and gender diversity are very natural in Hindu world.

“... in the Hindu World, culture (Sanskriti, in Sanskrit) remains an artificial imposition on nature (prakriti), enabling humans to discover their humanity by offering a chance to make room for, or reject, diversity.” (Pattanaik 9)

“Transgenders of India who have been marginalized and decentered for decades have taken to writing to let their unheard voices echo in the ears of society. Their writings are impregnated with their ordeals to be recognized as mere human beings let alone to be treated equal.” (Dasari et al.)

“Eunuchs in India were often accorded respect in the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal courts, holding positions of eminence especially under the Khiljis of Delhi in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and under the Mughals from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.” (Dasari et al.)

“Although many eunuchs were initially brought as slaves into the houses of Muslim nobility in principalities such as Awadh and Hyderabad, they were accorded respect and trusted with sensitive positions, including guarding the harim, or inner/female spaces within the palace.” (Reddy 8)

“Transgenders were well treated and adorned with respectful positions during Mughal rule.” (Dasari et al.)

“India has more than 200 years of colonial past. Colonialization has left paralyzing effects on the psyche of Indians. The advent of colonization made the transgenders of India ‘others.’ ... In addition to that the mere sight of transgenders and the importance they were given in Mughal courts was so infuriating for the British.” (Dasari et al)

“Accounts of early European travelers showed that they were repulsed by the sight of Hijras and could not comprehend why they were given so much respect in the royal courts and other institutions. In the second half of the 19th century, the British colonial administration vigorously sought to criminalize the hijra community and to deny them the civil rights. Hijras were considered to be separate caste or tribe in different parts of India by the colonial administration.” (Michelraj 18)

“Later British criminalized hijras of India and introduced the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. According to the act the hijras are the section of people who don sarees and dance on streets and are involved in kidnapping and castrating children. This wrong notion about hijras was so strongly etched on the minds of Indians that even after the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952; the prejudicial attitudes prevail against hijras in India till date. They are seen as criminals and their presence is scared by many.” (Dasari et al)

However, the Sahitya Akademi’s journal, Indian Literature, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar dedicated the March-April 2024 issue entirely to trans writing. In her editorial note, Kumar states that,

“The current issue of Indian Literature has endeavored to create a space for trans writing by trans writers, from different Indian languages, that call for a

sincere reckoning with a world usually dismissed by most people as inconsequential.” (Farhan)

“Much of the work deals with the experience of being stigmatized with varied personal divulgements and snippets of conversations with trans writers reflecting an undertow of despair. Dissecting their trauma and sense of loss while also offering some hope, the issue shows that trans people first experience disappointment and alienation within their own homes. With time, as their freedom is curtailed, they confront increasing disrespect.” (Farhan)

Manipuri writer Santa Khurai says in her author's note,

“My father constantly expressed his displeasure at my feminine nature, while my mother felt humiliated in front of neighbors, relatives and friends. Not many interested in listening to my problems and frustrations. This suppressed pain and anger led to a feeling of relief and bliss the minute I started relieving those moments and writing this memoir.” (Panda)

Manobi Bandyopadhyay says in her memoir,

“I write with the belief that it would help society understand people like me better. We are slightly different outwardly, but we are humans just as you are and have the same needs physical and emotional- just as you have.” (Panda)

Editor Sukrita writes,

“The gender binary and the system of normative sexual relations that is built upon it are so deeply embedded in the psychology that the implementation of new laws that recognize the rights of LGBTQI people may not be possible. So, they continue to be subjected to mockery and an unending saga of dehumanization by an insensitive society surrounding them.” (Panda)

“Hijras were an integral part of the courtly traditions of Muslim kings. But when they were overthrown by the British, the hijras landed on the street. Today, hijras beg in shops and other public places, and do sex work, not out of choice, but out of necessity. How, otherwise, can we keep body and soul together.” (Tripathi 178)

“For many Indians – both upper- and middle-class – hijras exist (and to some extents have always existed) at the periphery of their imaginaries, making themselves visible only on certain circumscribed ritual occasions.” (Reddy 3)

Thus, the process of marginalizing the transgenders which was initiated by European imperial aggression is still continued in India till date. It can be said that transgenders of India are appallingly affected and destroyed by ‘cultural denigration’ meaning

“The conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model.” (Ashcroft 9)

“Transgender people are marginal group in the society. They suffer from the lack of continuity in their identity, lack of self-esteem, overemphasized and unwanted distinctiveness and injustice at every turn.” (PP and Nishanthi)

As nearly all people are categorized as male or female, those who express characteristics ordinarily attributed to the other gender are stigmatized and seen often as social deviants. Inconsistency in the performance between biological sex and gender expression is usually

not tolerated by others (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1996). Because these individuals violate conformist gender expectations, they become targeted for discrimination and oppression.

"Therefore, they turn out to be members of a marginalized and vulnerable population that experiences more psychosocial and health problems than other social groups." (Lombardi, 2001)

Marginalization and Tormented Self of Indian Transgenders: Analysis of 'A Burning'

"To say that the Indian constitution claims to provide equal opportunity and rights to every citizen. But in the context of Transgender, this does not seem to be reality. It is a matter of the recent past decades that if a Transgender baby was born in a family, then his family members could not keep him/her in their house even if they wanted too so. After all, what is the fault of the baby for being born Transgender? But due to social unacceptability, the Transgender baby had to abandon his parents' house. Since they were not provided with the means of education and employment, they were forced to live their lives by doing the job of a sex worker, begging, dancing etc." (Suman)

"The transgender community in India has historically been marginalized and discriminated against, socially, economically and politically. Trans individuals are viewed by many as abnormal or deviant, and face physical and emotional violence and abuse, including sexual assault. Many incidents go unreported due to fear of retribution or lack of legal recognition." (Mugloo and Rafiq)

"In particular, the trans community struggles to access affordable and quality healthcare. When it comes to gender-affirmation surgery, "the process is punishing and burdensome," said Abhina, and expensive, costing from 300,000 to 800,000 rupees (about £3,000 to £8,000), a prohibitive sum for many trans individuals." (Mugloo and Rafiq)

"Since the transgender communities lack education and employment opportunities they are looked upon as a lower class by society resulting in exclusion. Their self-esteem and self-confidence hit really hard because of this exclusion and they end up taking undesirable jobs." (Unacademy)

In her debut novel Megha Majumdar has tried to capture the most realistic image of modern India. Here we find the entanglement of three major characters, one is Jivan a Muslim girl, Lovely, the transwoman and the unnamed PT sir. Here our focus is on Lovely, the transwoman also called a hijra. She plays a major and it would not be inconsiderate to mark her as one of the central characters of the story. With her the writer touches one of the rarely talked topics of the life of a transgender, their perceptions, thoughts and their vision of life. Lovely, her name and she narrate her life in the story, her struggle since childhood and she asks for a social space to breathe peacefully. But that is also not granted to her in the beginning of the novel. But towards the end she becomes a successful transwoman fetching a film of Sonali Khan a big director of Bollywood. The positive and empathetic portrayal of her character is one of the strongest points of the novel. In a handful writings of the transgender people, Majumdar's 'A Burning' is a new thing. The novel puts questions about how power and circumstance can influence individual lives and their choices and to what extent individuals can be free in real sense when facing systemic oppression and suppression and choking of their voices.

Human being is a social animal as Aristotle says. If anybody living outside the society then he is either God or beast. A human being always lives in a society and his identity,

personality is shaped by a society in which he lives. A man or a woman or a transgender always needs a society to live in. But due to the social and cultural construct of gender a transgender is often excluded from the society and looked upon as a stranger or alien. This society is made of individuals. And transgenders are also a stakeholder of the society. In the hegemony of gender binary, they are ignored and remain invisible to the society. Human society needs to be more inclusive for which there shall not be any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex, gender or religion. The exploration and expression plights, psychological damage has been trending in the literary landscapes of the world. They protest being marginalized from the society. They show resistance and they want to be included in the society as a full-fledged member.

She faces double marginalization one due to her non conformity to the gender binary, second her financial condition and poverty. She is thrown away by her family as her gender identity is something different, she does not get a respectable life and dignified life. She struggles for it. She is socially and politically disenfranchised from the society. Systematic oppression has just made it normal for such people to tolerate and bear everything they have undergone. She faces social marginalization and ostracism. Lovely's character is a striking depiction of the challenges faced by transgender people in India, who are often seen as "third gender" and their problems are considered as peripheral as they are not in the center and face discrimination and social ostracism. Her dreams of becoming a successful movie star, despite the odds, hardships highlight her resilience and stout determination to overcome adversity and establish an identity in the billions. Showcasing their complexity, humanity she gives voice to the Hijra character. Amplifies her voice by making her a chief character, she addresses the socio-political issues of the contemporary times surrounding the non-binary, non-conforming people. Representation of the internal struggles, monologues, the search for identity, self-acceptance, their experiences in the society, the society fails to recognize their unique identities rejecting as otherness. They should be considered as human beings, they have unique talents, what they need is opportunity to showcase, exhibit their talent they need support, they need guidance they have highlighted their intelligence, resilience emotional stability and depth better understanding quality.

'*A Burning*' by Majumdar captures the marginalized by the Indian society or by a dominant class. Here three characters have been entangled. But the primary objective of the paper is to show what it means to be a transgender in Indian society. How they fare in the society. What are the challenges they face to assert themselves. They want to establish their identity but the society is not accepting them. They are undergoing pressures from the dominant classes and they are subject to humiliation, emotional breakdown and often with suicidal tendencies. After all they are human beings. Lovely, tells her story thus expressing her dislocation and painful life.

The hijra, Lovely does not get a place in the society. Wherever she goes she gets insulted, hate and she has been looked upon as lifeless animal. People never consider her as a human being. She is ignored, humiliated only because of her gender variance. The local guava seller, who is a poor man insults her. When she asks him time, he at first did not respond at all thus hurting the sentiments of Lovely.

"Eight thirty he is grumbling, because he is not wishing to share with me the fruits of his wrist watch." (Majumdar 7)

Her life revolves around humiliation and social hatred. When she enters into the lady's compartment of the train, there ladies also do not treat her well. A lady says-

"This hijra could not find a different compartment to hassle?" (Majumdar 7)

She has been living a very difficult life as all the ways are blocked for her. Her life as a hijra is not simple at all as there are lack of opportunities in employment, education and many more. She is not respected rather endured by all.

"Nothing is simple like me, not even one hour on train." (Majumdar 7)

As she is a hijra, she does not belong to anywhere. Even her classmates make fun of her gender thus pushing her to the margin.

"Uff! Don't make me say it, Lovely. I can't do this marriage scene with a half man." (Majumdar 10)

Who wants to live a life full of insults. But there is no other way left for Lovely and she has to get habituated with this way of living.

"Oh! I am used to this, on the road, on the train, at the shops (Majumdar 10)."

When she comes to meet Mr. Debnath, her acting teacher she is not allowed to enter to his house and he gives the excuse that the house is recently painted and there is nothing to sit on/ But lovely knows the truth and this bitter truth makes her life worse/

"The truth was that Mrs. Debnath was not wanting a hijra in the house." (Majumdar 12)

The transgender people are considered to be sorceress who traps man and they are often mistaken as criminals. Lovely is in love with Azad. Azad is also committed to her. But his brother comes, pleads and threatens Lovely to get away with him, because the society cannot accept it.

"Whatever curse you have given him, let him go, witch!..... You have trapped him"

" Now you have to free him! Let him get married like a normal person." (Majumdar 18)

As Lovely is trapped in a different body she feels very miserable and helpless. She often annihilated herself and torments her soul. She cannot love herself as she thinks she is having certain defects. This type of self-awareness makes her life more painful.

"..... I am thinking, because he is not having no defects unlike myself." (Majumdar 61)

Her feeling of marginalization is so heavy when she sees a woman washing her hands after getting the touch of the her. She feels so upset and cannot express to others.

"She is washing her hands; she is washing her hands of us." (Majumdar 61)

She feels ostracized from the society as the sweet shop owner is not ready to serve her.

"He is unhappy that he is having to serve me I know." (Majumdar 62)

The society makes their life miserable and they seek little space to share their pain and express their agony.

"This is how my life is going forward some insult in my face, some sweet in my mouth." (Majumdar 63)

Her position in the society is so invalid that she is not getting help from either of the gender.

"In life many things are happening for no reason at all, you might be begging on the train and getting acid thrown on your face. You might be hiding in the

women's compartment for safety and getting kicked by the ladies."
(Majumdar 64)

She is facing such a cruel life. Nobody supports her, not even her family members. Everyone scares her away. She is not getting recognition for her uniqueness rather all reject her by her otherness. She feels marginalized when she grows up. She tells her early childhood story. As she grows up and gets conscious with her sexuality she feels estranged from her body. As a child she gets very good treatment from her parents as they take her to the cinema with her cousins. But things take a drastic turn as she grows up; she faces the gender trouble.

"In the outside world, I was wearing boy's shorts and a boy's haircut and playing cricket. But, secretly at home. I was trying lipstick. I was wearing my mother's saris once, twice, thrice. The fourth time my uncles were persuading my father to kick me out of the house." (Majumdar 124)

The impact of exclusion is so heavy and as rightly put by a transgender activist.

"For many years, I tortured myself. I was afraid of what it would do to my life to finally come out and embrace who I really was. The impact on my mental health was profound. I found ways to bury or numb my innate drives and desires that were destructive. I struggled for years with heroin addiction and attempted suicide several times. Shame and self-loathing were my constant companions. Society and family told me back then that trans and gay people were freaks or abnormal, so I internalized that transphobia."
(Cadger)

Hijras do not have equal opportunities thus earn their livelihood by begging and through sex works. She torments herself being in a helpless situation where she earns money by begging and by giving blessings. After thrown out of the house, finding no other way she takes shelter in a hijra house and learns dancing, singing, luring and charming strangers only to fill her stomach. She never gets educational opportunities like boys and girls get. Her education stopped once the NGO's funding is over. In Azad's wedding she feels tortured by the villagers as they push and pull among themselves to take photos with her and she feels embarrassed. There is no escape from this life and she thinks she can never earn respect through this cheap job. She is psychologically broken due to her position in the society.

Hijras are continuously pushed to the margins even in getting the medical facilities. They never get good medical facilities due to their position in the society. In this novel *Lovely*, the hijra expresses her pain and grief as her community fails to receive proper medical facilities. Her fear has been aggravated as she sees her best friend Ragini gets operated without anesthesia by a local dentist. Her operation is so carelessly done that she dies and nobody has the power to question the wrong. Hijras fear to go to the real doctors as they may charge higher fees which they cannot afford. It is due to fear of mistreatment *Lovely* never gets operated.

Only because she is a hijra, that people around her makes fun of her and think she is not worthy of a human being, or her dreams. She is cheated by the production houses. Nobody is prepared to see a human being made of flesh, blood, emotions beyond a hijra. The production houses even offer her roles of hijra only as if she cannot justify other roles. Mr. Jhunjhunwala a. a film producer says that she would be fit for the hijra part. The roles offered to her is very undermining like a hijra is thrown away by the society, or chased by a broom.

But Lovely wants to be a heroin only. The society makes her a prey to humiliation, character assassination and too much mental agony. The society stands as the barrier in her path to happiness and fortune. She is ready to marry Azad but the society cannot accept it so she has to endure the heartbreak.

Conclusion: Now it is high time to bring transgender people into the fold of society, they should be provided with all kinds of opportunities to excel in life. More and more transgender writings should be mainstreamed. Megha Majumdar's debut novel brings this issue to limelight. Transgender people should go ahead. This novel brilliantly displays both the physical difficulties as well as mental pressures of the transgender. The society should be more inclusive in nature and help each stakeholder to go ahead with all courage, conviction. Nobody sees the internal pain of others. And Hijras as a community live in oblivion for the society. Their welfare, their contribution to the society should be more and more acknowledged. They should be validated more and more only for the betterment of the society and hijra lives. The society is not bigger than the constitution and the hijras should be more empowered by the virtue of it. Lovely, her friend Ragini and other hijras of the hijra house have different stories but all stories tell the humiliation, mental turmoil, negligence of the family members and marginalization of the society as well as the government.

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